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Senator's troubles, public and private, aren't any secret

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WASHINGTON — Ever since Sen. Dave Durenberger became the guardian of the nation's most hush-hush secrets, his public and private lives have been battered by noisy controversy.

In his first year as chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, Durenberger has been accused by no less than the head of the CIA of compromising national security. At the same time, he has been struggling to cope with what appears to be a midlife crisis, marked by a broken marriage and embarrassing public behavior.

Long regarded as a diligent lawmaker, the Minnesota Republican holds one of the most sensitive positions on Capitol Hill.

As chairman of the intelligence committee, Durenberger is one of the first people outside the administration to hear about top-secret missions or plots to subvert foreign governments.

In times of international tension,



Durenberger

he is in constant touch with the White House and CIA decision-makers. He regularly enters a windowless, hermetically sealed room, guarded by vaultlike doors and considered thoroughly spy-proof. There he is briefed on what the government is doing secretly to intervene in the affairs of other nations.

When Durenberger entered this tight-lipped environment last January, he said he intended to keep himself and the spy game out of the public eye.

Then came:

● The "year of the spy" — an unprecedented series of leaks, spy arrests and other U.S. intelligence failures that pulled Durenberger onto nightly newscasts and the front pages.

● A rip-roaring public feud between Durenberger and CIA Director William Casey, who at one point accused the senator and his committee of "repeated compromise of sensitive intelligence sources and methods."

● An apparent reversal by Durenberger on the issue of clandestine aid to anti-Communist rebels in Nicaragua. His votes for aid capped years of opposing the Reagan administration's attempts to wage covert war there.

● An arrest for disorderly conduct at Boston's Logan International Airport, where Durenberger jumped ahead of a long line waiting for a taxi, then got into a shouting match with a policeman. Charges were later dropped.

● The unraveling of Durenberger's personal life, with newspapers back home chronicling an estrangement from his wife, Penny; a relationship with a woman who had worked in his office; and drug problems involving two of his four sons.

Study in contradictions

Durenberger's friends and critics alike say these episodes illustrate a man who is a study in contradictions.

Six-foot-three, white-templed and blessed with a deep, booming voice, Durenberger, 51, has been described as "central casting's version of a U.S. senator."

He displays the stereotypical Minnesota traits of self-control and folksy amiability. Yet, say several friends and colleagues, he is prone to mood swings.

He is widely perceived as thoughtful, but over the last year he has been accused by critics from the right and left of making "off-the-wall" statements and talking too much.

Despite the simultaneous pressures of personal problems and the unexpected spotlight on his chairmanship, Durenberger insists it "probably was the best year of my life."

He has been quoted at length in newspapers back home about his so-called midlife crisis and family troubles, and his aides say he has "bottomed out" and is recovering.

"I think [that] in terms of just a 'small p' person, I am so much better a person than I was a year ago today," Durenberger said.

Nevertheless, Durenberger's personal behavior and confessions of inner turmoil have provided ammunition for his critics and raised eyebrows among friends.

One respected intelligence community leader, who is sympathetic to Durenberger's political views, said there are concerns he may be "flipping out."

Keeps roles separate

Durenberger maintains that his personal troubles have not affected his performance. "I have always pulled apart the person from the senator," he said.

Aside from his personal behavior, Durenberger's public performance as the nation's chief spywatcher brings varying reviews.

Detractors from the right say that, instead of working cooperatively with intelligence agencies, Durenberger is dictating foreign policy to the administration.

At the heart of the conflict is Durenberger's resistance to the emerging "Reagan Doctrine," which holds that, instead of simply staving off Communist takeovers, the United States should take the initiative to incite rebellions by "democratic forces."

On the other front, such liberal critics as Susan Benda of the American Civil Liberties Union say they are profoundly disappointed by Durenberger's apparent switch last year from critic to cheerleader for covert intervention in Central America.

"He was all over the place, depending on which group of nuns he talked to last," said a former committee staff member.